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ABSTRACT

The development of effective procedures for assessing the competency of counselors-in-training is a challenge facing counselor educators. The responsibility for assessment is documented in codes of ethics and standards for all counseling professional organizations. They suggest that students be assessed at admissions, during the program, and upon graduation on both academic competencies and personal issues that could interfere with their professional ability. Assessment procedures in the Department of Leadership and Counseling at Eastern Michigan University are described to illustrate how these types of procedures can be accomplished. (Contains 17 references.) (JDM)

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Chapter Four

Assessment in Counselor Education: Admissions, Retention, and Capstone Experiences

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Abstract

The development of effective procedures for assessing the competency of counselors-in-training is one of the greatest challenges currently facing counselor educators. The responsibility for assessment is documented in codes of ethics and standards of all counseling professional organizations. Students should be assessed at three stages—at admission, during the program, and on graduation—on both academic competency and personal issues that might interfere with professional ability. The assessment procedures used at one program are described to illustrate how such assessment might be accomplished.

Counselor educators are increasingly serving as gatekeepers for the counseling profession. As part of this role, they grapple with how to assess counselor trainees' potential to be effective counselors. Separate assessment questions arise at the point of students' admission to an educational program, as students progress through the training program, and at exit or graduation. Making admissions decisions involves determining criteria for who has the potential to become a counselor. Decisions regarding retention in the program require an ongoing assessment of how or whether the necessary competencies are developing. At graduation, counselor educators in most states make recommendations for licensure and must determine whether or not the student has acquired the requisite competencies. This paper will review relevant literature addressing these questions and outline the assessment procedures used in one program.

Codes of ethics, accreditation standards, and recent legal cases provide a foundation for the assessment responsibilities of counselor

educators. The American Counseling Association *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* (1995) addresses evaluation, limitations, and endorsement of students and supervisees:

> Counselors clearly state to students and supervisees, in advance of training, the levels of competency expected, appraisal methods, and timing of evaluations for both didactic and experiential components. Counselors provide students and supervisees with periodic performance appraisal and evaluation feedback throughout the training program. (Section F.2.C) . . . Counselors, through ongoing evaluation and appraisal, are aware of the academic and personal limitations of students and supervisees that might impede performance. Counselors assist students and supervisees in securing remedial assistance when needed, and dismiss from the training program supervisees who are unable to provide competent service due to academic or personal limitations. (Section F.3.A) . . . Counselors do not endorse students or supervisees for certification, licensure, employment or completion of an academic degree training program if they believe students or supervisees are not qualified for the endorsement. (Section F.1.H.)

The Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) identifies similar assessment responsibilities of supervisors in its *Ethical Guidelines for Counselor Educators and Supervisors* (1993), which states, "Supervisors have the responsibility of recommending remedial assistance to the supervisee and of screening from the training program, applied counseling setting, or state licensure those supervisees who are unable to provide competent professional services" (Section 2.12).

Finally, the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 1994) has established standards that require counselor-education programs to have clear admissions criteria, as well as selection and retention procedures:

> When evaluations indicate a student's inappropriateness for the program, faculty assist in facilitating the student's transition out of the program and, if possible, into a more appropriate area of study. (Section F.2.C) . . . Admissions criteria, as well as selection and retention procedures, should consider qualities such as the applicant's potential success in forming interpersonal relationships; aptitude for graduate level study; and openness to self-examination and personal and professional self-development. (Section V.K.)
>
> The responsibility of the counselor-education program for ensuring the competence of its graduates is illustrated

in a recent lawsuit against Louisiana Technical University. A graduate of the counseling program was sued by a client for allegedly encouraging a dual relationship. The client also sued the university for failure to sufficiently train the counselor (Custer, 1994).

Admissions

Admissions decisions historically have been based on academic and other traditional predictors including undergraduate grade-point average (GPA), Graduate Record Examination scores, and letters of recommendation (Bradey & Post, 1991; Gimmestad & Goldsmith, 1973; Hosford, Johnson, & Atkinson, 1984). Bradey and Post (1991) found little data to support academic criteria as predictors of counselor competency and recommended developing effective ways to evaluate criteria such as interpersonal competence, openness to professional self-development, and openness to the values and opinions of others. Interviews or observation of applicant interactions, or both, would facilitate this type of assessment. Hayes (1997) noted a lack of clear-cut guidelines for choosing the most appropriate and effective screening methods. Procedures tend to vary widely from program to program.

Assessing the applicant's/student's mental state, or emotional problems that may prevent the person from working effectively with clients, is necessary. The notion of the "wounded healer" (Maeder, 1989), that people with psychological problems are drawn to the helping professions, is controversial and the data are not consistent. We do know, however, that in order for counselors to be effective with clients, their own problems cannot interfere. The counselor's first responsibility is to do no harm to the client. White and Franzoni (1990) found that on six of seven Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI–2; Butcher et al., 1989) scales, counselors-in-training had higher levels of psychological disturbance (depression, hysteria, psychological deviance, paranoia, psychasthenia, schizophrenia) than the general population. There was no difference in social interest, locus of control, and coping.

How do counselor educators identify those applicants whose psychological state is likely to interfere with their providing competent services to clients? More thorough screening at admissions should reduce the number of students who must be dismissed once they are in the program. Hayes (1997) found little evidence in the literature that counseling programs are using standardized instruments to assess mental disorders in applicants. Increasingly program representatives are using interviews in an informal way, but they are generally not using standardized or even systematic assessment methods. They look

for characteristics such as "active mental disorder," "evidence of pathology," "awareness of influence on others," capable/appropriate interpersonal skills, "understanding of self," "inappropriate behaviors," and so on (Hayes, 1997). Without a standardized instrument, however, this is a more subjective process than assessing academic performance.

Specific information is needed concerning the personal characteristics that have been shown to limit a counselor's effectiveness. How and when we assess these is another issue. Hayes (1997) gives the example of a program that requires applicants to take an introductory course that includes small-group work. Students are rated on a scale of 1 to 5 on 13 characteristics including open-mindedness, tolerance of ambiguity, objectivity, sense of humor, willingness to learn and grow psychologically, emotional stability, personal security, and confidence. After an extensive literature review, Frame and Stevens-Smith, (1995) identified nine personal characteristics that are necessary for counselor development: being open, flexible, positive, cooperative, willing to use and accept feedback, aware of impact on others, able to deal with conflict, able to accept personal responsibility, and able to express feelings openly and appropriately. Students in the program are evaluated on these at the midpoint and the end of every course. Baldo, Softas-Nall, and Shaw (1997) defined substandard behaviors, including failure to demonstrate empathic capacity, maturity of judgment, ability to work closely with others, capacity to handle stress, and tolerance for deviance.

Several broad characteristics emerge after reviewing these studies: (a) openness to self-examination (willingness to use and accept feedback, awareness of impact on others, willingness to accept personal responsibility, willingness to learn and grow psychologically); (b) potential for effective interpersonal relationships (awareness of impact on others, ability to work closely with others, empathic capacity, ability to deal with conflict, open and appropriate expression of feelings); (c) open-mindedness (tolerance for deviance and for ambiguity); and (d) emotional stability (capacity to handle stress).

Retention and Dismissal

No matter how good admissions procedures are, some students who cannot meet academic standards or whose personal problems and characteristics interfere with their effectiveness will be admitted to counselor-education programs. Olkin and Gaughen (1991) found that counselor educators often identify problem students through supervised clinical experiences. Problems include poor clinical skills; interpersonal problems; refusal to accept constructive feedback or directions; and intrapersonal problems such as substance use, personality disorders, and immaturity.

Baldo, Softas-Nall, and Shaw (1997) describe a process for review of students' progress in the program and processes for remediation, voluntary resignation, and dismissal from the program. They stress the importance of (a) documentation so that faculty judgments are not seen as capricious or prejudicial and (b) dismissal decisions being made by the entire faculty. Other procedures that insure the student's due process include (a) the student and faculty member are informed of problem areas and methods of remediation; (b) a written plan for remediation is approved by the faculty and signed by the student; (c) the student has the opportunity to present his or her case to the faculty; (d) and an appeals procedure is available. Frame and Stevens-Smith (1995) describe a process that involves the development of a policy statement expressing the faculty's belief in the "essential function" of personal characteristics in the development of ethical and competent counselors. This statement, along with the Personal Characteristics Evaluation Form, is published in the student handbook. Students are required to read the handbook and sign a statement that they have read and will abide by the policies. All syllabi include a statement about professional characteristics and their regular evaluation. Clear steps to follow when problems are identified have been identified, and remediation opportunities are offered if seen as appropriate.

Exit or Graduation

Recently, faculty in counselor-education programs have begun to re-examine their final evaluation methods (Carney, Cobia, & Shannon, 1996). The assessment of a student's ability to apply acquired knowledge and appropriateness for the profession cannot be accomplished by traditional methods such as comprehensive examinations or theses. The portfolio is one way of assessing multiple dimensions that make up counseling effectiveness, however, particularly if the portfolio is used as an adjunct to other methods.

Portfolios have been used in two ways: to document a student's progress over time (developmental or formative evaluation), and to show a student's best work (summative evaluation). It is possible to use portfolios for both formative and summative purposes. In counselor education, portfolios have been used primarily as opportunities for self-reflection or self-assessment by the student. Reviewing portfolios periodically with the student allows for remediation. In this way, a portfolio could be integral to an ongoing evaluation process (Baltimore, Hickson, George, & Crutchfield, 1996).

Using portfolios to demonstrate a student's best work has been discussed less frequently in the counselor-education literature. Carney and colleagues (1996) recommend that such assessment focus on

criteria including ability for self-reflection; counseling skills; application of knowledge; professional identification; and ability in specialty areas such as community or school counseling. Contents of portfolios would include research papers, treatment plans, audio and video tapes of practice, progress notes, self-evaluations, and other items. The challenge for faculty is to develop criteria to evaluate each of these components.

Program Example

In order to select students who have both the academic potential to succeed in graduate school and the personal characteristics to be effective counselors, in the Department of Leadership and Counseling at Eastern Michigan University we have developed an extensive two-phase admissions process. By doing a more thorough assessment at the point of admission, we hope to minimize the need for dismissal once students have begun the program. Our admissions screening considers multiple variables, including aptitude for graduate study, career goals, writing ability, and potential for effectiveness as a counselor. In the first phase of the process, faculty members assess the applicant's aptitude for graduate study by considering undergraduate GPA or the GPA from another graduate degree, which must be at least 2.75 for an undergraduate, or 3.3 for a graduate, degree. Although all applicants must take the Graduate Record Examination for admission to graduate programs in the College of Education, we do not consider these scores unless the applicant does not meet the minimum GPA requirement. The applicant's letter of intent is used to assess the extent to which his or her career goals match program goals, as well as writing ability, defined as clarity of expression, organization, and grammar. In this phase of the process, potential for effectiveness as a counselor is assessed by reviewing the applicant's resume and letters of recommendation. The resume of an applicant who has seriously thought about counseling as a career would reflect involvement in personal and professional growth activities and a variety of life and professional experiences. Faculty reviewers rate the letter of intent, resume, and letters of recommendation on a five-point Likert scale from exceptional to unacceptable. Based on these ratings, an applicant may be invited for an interview or screened out, or the application held for discussion with other faculty members.

In the second phase of the process, selected applicants come to campus to participate in group and individual interviews. Assessment during these interviews focuses on the applicant's personal characteristics and potential for success as a counselor. In the group interview, applicants are assigned to a small group, which is given a

task to complete. Faculty observe the group interaction and rate each applicant on behaviors considered to be facilitative in interpersonal interactions using a five-point Likert scale. Examples of these behaviors include willingness to listen to others, attempts to understand others, acceptance of difference, openness, and appropriateness of contributions. The purpose of this activity is to identify applicants whose behavior is not facilitative and who, therefore, may be ineffective in a counseling relationship. In the individual interview, each applicant meets with a faculty member and responds to three questions that focus on the applicant's career goals and decision to apply to this graduate program, self-perceptions about areas of strength and weakness, and experiences with people who are different. The interviewer rates the applicant's response to each question on a five-point Likert scale and, based on these ratings, makes a recommendation regarding admission. The faculty then meets to discuss each applicant's ratings from the group and individual interviews, and final admission decisions are made.

Our portfolio process is in a much earlier stage of development than is the admissions process. The portfolio can best be described as a formative assessment and is presented to students as an opportunity to present a collection of evidence of their knowledge, accomplishments, and growth during the program. Contents are to reflect several areas including the student as a new professional (statement of goals and philosophy, resume, professional disclosure statement, etc.); professional and personal growth and development (memberships, presentations, conference attendance, recognition/awards, volunteer experiences, etc.); academic growth and development (assessment profile, group plan, research proposal, case presentation, etc.); and counseling skills and experience (rating forms from skills classes, clinical internship evaluations, skill demonstration on video, treatment plans, etc.).

Once a year, a portfolio symposium is held in a format similar to a conference poster session. Students display their portfolios and discuss them with other students, faculty, administrators, and community members. Although faculty members do provide each student with written feedback about the portfolio, specific criteria for assessment have not been developed at this point.

The development of effective assessment procedures for making admissions decisions, for use as students progress through programs, and for determining which students graduate and become credentialed to provide counseling services is clearly among the greatest challenges currently facing counselor educators. It is imperative that research and dialogue continue to address these issues.

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